

BACKGROUND-

Epidemics: A Story of Loss

The family was and still is the basis and the basic unit of Wabanaki life. Long ago, it was more than just the home—it was also the workplace and the school. Children grew up among people who were working as members of a family and a band, and they learned by observation and example. From birth, infants, riding in a cradleboard padded with soft moss on the mother's back, were a part of a group, surrounded by people who cared for them and would help them grow up.

Kinship ties were and still are important. Long ago, the bond between siblings of the same sex was especially important. Sisters or brothers and their families would often remain close, building their wigwams nearby each other. While the basic social unit was the nuclear family (parents and their children), other family members—parents' siblings, grandparents, cousins, and especially nieces and nephews (who were frequently adopted into the family)—might share a wigwam or live close by. The pressure of an extended family living together was made easier by a code of etiquette that determined the use of space in the wigwam. Usually women sat on one side and men on the other, more or less in order of age. There was also a division of public and private space, with areas near the walls being private and those near the central hearth more public.

Children were cherished. They were taught by example and by stories that embodied history, explanations of the natural world and examples of correct behavior. They might be cajoled or teased, but they were rarely punished. They learned by watching and working alongside their parents and older relatives, doing productive work for their community from an early age. With large extended families, children were responsible to many more adults than just their parents, but those adults were also responsible for the children.

There is no record of coming of age ceremonies among the Wabanaki, although boys were deemed to have reached adulthood by about 14 or 15 when they killed their first moose. When a young couple wished to marry, there was an “engagement” period of a year or more. During this time the young man lived with the woman's family, proving his worth as a provider able to care for a family of his own.

Gender roles were well defined in Wabanaki society. The men hunted, fished, trapped, built canoes and went to war as necessary. The women cooked and preserved food, and made much of what the family needed to survive and live comfortably, including clothing from hides, and household utensils like birchbark containers. There are some reports that women would join in the hunting and fishing; certainly, they often processed the fish or game.

Older people were and still are respected. Before the Passamaquoddy used a written language, elders were especially important as repositories of knowledge and experience. “Grandmother” and “Grandfather” were general terms of respect used in addressing elders and did not necessarily indicate a biological relationship. In the great cycle of stories featuring Klouskap, the Wabanaki culture hero with magical powers who orders the world for humans, the person he learns from is frequently Grandmother Woodchuck—the clear message is that one learns from one’s elders.

When the Europeans first arrived in northern New England, the Wabanaki lived in semipermanent villages of five to 150 or more wigwams. People in these settlements were usually related by either kinship or friendship, but in any case residence was voluntary and people who disagreed with the decisions of the leaders simply left. These settlements were frequently on the estuaries of the larger rivers, although at least one major village was apparently centered on an inland lake system. In eastern Maine, the palisaded villages found among agricultural peoples to the west were unknown until Colonial times. Groups might move out from the larger village to smaller, seasonal hunting and fishing camps in the interior, on rivers or near the coast. In the spring of 1614, Captain John Smith reported that the area around Penobscot Bay was, “...well inhabited with many people, but they were from their habitations, either fishing among the Iles, or hunting the lakes and woods....[O]ver all the land, iles or other impediments, you may well see them sixteene or eighteene leagues (about 40 miles) from their situation.”

While the Wabanaki were basically egalitarian, there were several leaders in a typical village. A **motewolon** (m'-DEH-w'-l'n) was a person with spiritual powers, who could communicate with the unseen worlds, and served as a shaman, and sometimes a healer. A **kinap** (GHEE-nahb), the literal translation of which is “great man,” was a person with skill and bravery who was consulted and who led the band in times of war. A **sakom** (ZAH-g'm) or **sagamore** was a respected community member whose advice was valued. Sakoms generally came from large economically and politically important families, but they led by respect and example rather than by coercion. Sometimes these roles were combined—a motewolon might also be a kinap or sakom. Sakoms were usually chosen for life, although they could be deposed if they lost the confidence of their followers. The position was sometimes hereditary, although it might as easily be passed to a nephew as to a son, while kinaps were usually chosen by ability.

Sakoms would meet together, usually in the summer, to make formal decisions regarding territorial distributions, peace and war, and alliances. Decisions, both among the sakoms and between the sakoms and their band members, were usually by consensus, and not always easily reached. There was no one overall chief of the Wabanaki bands, although at the time of the earliest contact, Maine and Canada’s Maritime Peninsula were governed by five “superchiefs.” We actually know these men by name—Membertou was the Souriquois sakom in the area where the Passamaquoddy people live today.

Europeans brought their own ideas of social structure with them to the New World and they often referred to sakoms as “kings” or “chiefs.” Even so, many recognized the differences between Wabanaki and European leadership structures. An entry in *Jesuit Relations*, the annual report sent back to France by missionaries to the New World, regarding sakoms reads, “They have reproached me a hundred times because we fear our Captains, while they laugh at and make sport of theirs. All the authority of their chief is in his tongue’s end; for he is powerful in so far as he is eloquent; and even if he kills himself talking and haranguing he will not be obeyed unless he pleases [them].” The Europeans valued their own system of leadership for its order and stability, and saw the Indians as weak and disorganized. The Wabanaki, conversely, valued equality and freedom of choice and saw the European system as restrictive and oppressive.

During the late 1600s, the introduction of European trade goods and the economics of the fur trade began to erode traditional Wabanaki life, as did the increasing number of Europeans wanting to clear and farm the land. What was most devastating to the Wabanaki, however, was the introduction of European diseases to which they had no immunity.

There is a tendency to see pre-contact America as a disease-free paradise. It is difficult to get accurate data, but work done on South American mummies indicates the pre-Columbian presence of tuberculosis, respiratory disease, dysentery and an array of intestinal parasites. These were mainly confined, however, to areas in Meso and Central America with settled agricultural communities and high population densities, like the Aztec and Inca empires. In areas like New England, where the population was more dispersed, diseases tended to be chronic and degenerative rather than epidemic. In Europe, by contrast, centuries of long distance trade, exploration and war combined with proximity to domesticated livestock and the rise of cities led to diseases like chickenpox, influenza, measles, mumps, rubella, small pox, typhus and the plague. While epidemics were serious for European communities, people developed at least partial immunity to many of these diseases. This was not the case in the New World, where what are called “virgin-soil epidemics” swept through the population with disastrous results.

At the time of European contact, the Wabanaki appear to have been a generally healthy people with a necessarily hardy lifestyle and a high-protein diet. They were described by an early explorer as “between five or six foote high, straight bodied, strongly composed, smooth skinned [and] merry countenanced.” Father Pierre Biard, a French Jesuit missionary, reported, “You do not encounter a big-bellied, hunchbacked, or deformed person among them: those who are leprous, gouty, affected with gravel, or insane, are unknown to them.”

But problems with disease quickly followed contact with Europeans. As early as 1610, Fr. Biard noted of the Souriquois, “[O]ne by one the different coasts according as they have begun to traffic with us, have been more reduced by disease.” Unfortunately, worse was soon to follow.

The years from 1616 to 1619 are known as “the Great Dying.” During this time, a pandemic swept coastal New England from Cape Cod through Maine. In Massachusetts, the death rate among Native people was as high as 90-95%. Among the Wabanaki, even with a more dispersed population, the death rate was more than 75%. The pathogen responsible for this epidemic has not been specifically identified, but it may have been plague, small pox or viral hepatitis. At the end of the Great Dying, many coastal villages were entirely abandoned, and the land was left virtually empty of its original inhabitants. An English settler observed, apparently without irony, “...the greater part of that land was left desert, without any to disturb or oppose our free and peaceable possession thereof.” Thomas Gores, Deputy Governor of Maine, was even more direct, writing in 1642, “The Indians are tractable. The Lord sent his avenging Angel and swept the most part away.”

In 1634, Maine Native people were hit by another epidemic, this time of small pox, which began at Plymouth Colony the preceding year. Small pox struck again in 1639, and in 1646 the Wabanaki were beset by an epidemic disease which has not been identified but which caused its victims to vomit blood. Yet another small pox epidemic swept through the St. Lawrence River Valley in 1669, wiping out most of the Native people in the area. Smaller epidemics and outbreaks of infections and often fatal diseases continued throughout the rest of the 1600s, and small pox epidemics reoccurred in the 1730s and 1750s.

The tribal groups called Souriquois and Etchemin by the Europeans (ancestors of today’s Passamaquoddy and Micmacs) survived the Great Dying as identifiable groups, but their social and economic structure and identity was stretched thinner and thinner by successive waves of disease. Not only were numbers severely reduced, but in a culture with no written language, as elders died, a rich repository of history and tradition was lost. As people tried to understand the calamity that had befallen their society, they could see that European traders and priests were usually unaffected by the diseases that were claiming so many of their family and friends. Their own shamans and healers were apparently powerless in the face of these epidemics. This was the era of missionaries, as French Catholics and English Protestants vied for the souls of Maine Native people, and many did convert to Christianity at this time. Some rejected the European religions outright, and others adopted an approach that blended elements of the old and new religions.

Disease, combined with the fur trade with its introduction of guns and alcohol and the increasing number of Europeans clearing and farming the land, brought devastating changes to the Wabanaki. Despite this difficult history, today the Passamaquoddy and other Wabanaki people survive, cherishing and reviving their traditional languages and cultures and maintaining their identity as a people. Their strength as a people have enabled them to maintain their communities, and in the 1960s and 1970s, they drew on this strength in their successful struggle for reparation and partial restitution for the lands lost in the 1600s and 1700s.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Text Resources

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Bourque, Bruce J. 2001. *Twelve Thousand Years. American Indians in Maine*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE.

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